Corinne Saunders

Beauty, Virtue and Danger in Medieval English Romance

> Your yen two wol slee me sodenly;
> I may the beautee of hem not sustene,
> So woundeth hit thourghout my herte kene.[1]

Thus Geoffrey Chaucer on the beauty of his lady's eyes, their power so great that she is 'of [his] lyf and deeth the quene' (9). Her beauty has chased pity from her heart and purchased him his death. These lines play on the medieval convention of love as illness that only the beloved can cure, and conceive of female beauty as an ambiguous force, enthralling in both positive and negative terms. In romance, the dominant fictional genre of the medieval period, female beauty is an imperative, signalling virtue and nobility, opening the way to the divine and inspiring the highest ideals, but at the same time dangerous, destructive, treacherous. Its powers can be magical and life-enhancing, literally wish-fulfilling, but also corrosive, imprisoning and death-dealing. Secular literary texts engage with the difficulties of interpreting beauty, of making sense of its affect. At the same time, beauty is strangely unelaborated in romance texts: interpretation cannot rest on detailed description of beauty, but must probe its often concealed valences, its collocations, and especially, the actions and consequences that attend beauty. Beauty proves virtue not only in those who possess it, but also in those who experience its power, both within and beyond the text.

Ideas and Ideals

The fraught relation of physical beauty to the mind and soul has a long history. Mark McIntosh's essay in this volume shows compellingly the enduring relation of beauty to the divine. The idea of beauty is crucial to the Platonic concept of ideal forms underlying nature: in the *Phaedrus*, Plato depicts beauty as shining out in the

heavens. Earthly beauty is unique in its ability to recall its ideal form : 'once here on earth we found, by means of the clearest of our senses, that it sparkles with particular clarity'; 'it is only beauty which has the property of being especially visible and especially lovable'. Whereas the corrupt man surrenders to earthly pleasure, the soul of the initiate in philosophy flourishes and grows wings through gazing on the divine form of the beloved: 'this is the experience men call love'.[2] Aristotle distinguishes beauty from good, but in the *Metaphysics* takes up the image to present the prime mover as an object of desire, setting the heavens in motion, in the same way that the soul is drawn by beauty. Crucial to his definition of beauty are 'magnitude' and 'order, symmetry and delimitation' – the objects of the mathematical sciences.[3] Aristotle returns to the same principles in *The Poetics*: 'beauty depends on size and order'; of a magnitude to be taken in by the eye and retained in memory.[4]

Beauty can perfect the senses and summon the soul, but Platonic ideas also underpin the *ubi sunt* motif so prominent in classical and medieval writing. The enduring beauty of the eternal is set against the 'sleek looks' of worldly beauty, 'fleeting and transitory, more ephemeral than the blossom in spring', as Boethius writes, an evocation of worldly transience especially influential for later Christian writers.[5] For St Augustine, perhaps the single most influential thinker for the later Middle Ages, who was profoundly influenced by neo-Platonic philosophy, earthly beauty is a potential snare, distracting from 'that beauty which is higher than souls'. He is torn between the pull of corporeal and divine, 'But although I am the person saying this and making the distinction, I also entangle my steps in beautiful externals. However, you rescue me, Lord, you rescue me'.[6] The beauty of the created world, including human beauty, both reflects and distracts from the divine. Medieval asceticism renounces worldly beauty precisely because of this power: 'We who have

turned aside from society, relinquishing for Christ's sake all the precious and beautiful things in the world, its wondrous light and colour, its sweet sounds and odours, the pleasures of taste and touch, for us all bodily delights are nothing but dung', writes St Bernard of Clairvaux.[7]

Yet theologians continue to recognise the moving and transformative power of beauty, and its relation to inner beauty. Elsewhere, St Bernard describes the brightness of beauty as replenishing the secret places of the heart and shining forth openly in the body: 'The body is an image of the mind, which, like an effulgent light scattering forth its rays, is diffused through its members and senses, shining through in action, discourse, appearance, movement – even in laughter. '[8] Hugh of St Victor recommends the aesthetic power of beauty: 'Look upon the world and all that is in it: you will find much that is beautiful and desirable . . . Gold . . . has its brilliance, the flesh its comeliness, clothes and ornaments their colour.'[9] If beauty could distract, it could also open the way to Paradise. Abbot Suger of St Denis is eager to follow the model of King Solomon, filling his church with beautiful things that carry the soul to God. Through 'the loveliness of the many-colored gems' he is 'called . . . away from external cares' and 'transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner'.[10]

Considerably more problematic than the ornamentation of churches or the power of art was the beauty of woman. In classical writing, there was already a well-established strand of misogyny, and a sense of the dangers of female beauty and desire. Aristotelian physiology places women as bodily, passive, defective, whereas men are associated with the soul, rationality and action. The poetry of Ovid and Juvenal is sharply satirical concerning the dangers as well as the fascinations of women. In medieval thought, these preconceptions merge with Scriptural warnings

concerning women – in Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, in exemplary stories such as that of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel, 11), in the epistles of St Paul, who requires that women be silent and modestly covered (1 Corinthians, 14: 34). All look back to the paradigm of Eve: created by God out of Adam's rib, and ruled by the bodily rather than the rational, seduced by the serpent and seducing Adam, causing the Fall and the first sin of concupiscence. But it is too easy to separate notions of female beauty from more general conceptions of beauty: the more positive, idealised aspect of beauty as an effulgent force does not disappear in medieval attitudes to female beauty. Commentators on the Song of Songs discuss the beauty of the Spouse as representing the Church, but in so doing they also engage with the ideal of female beauty. The many representations of the Virgin in medieval art and sculpture signal the transcendent power of female beauty, which in Mary reverses the Fall and rewrites the name of Eve as Ave. Despite a recurrent emphasis on the dangers of female beauty, the association between beauty and virtue is fundamental to both sacred and secular writing, an essential building block of romance. Suspense and drama are created by the tension between the expectation that interior and exterior, body and soul, will be aligned and the fear that they are not. In the female figures of romance, beauty shines out as a transformative, sometimes dangerous and destructive, force. It is no coincidence that its power can be associated with magic. In the enchantress, we see most clearly the two faces of beauty.

Shining beauty

The interweaving of idealism and realism, convention and originality characteristic of the romance genre is evident in its depictions of beauty. Beauty is a given of medieval romance, as it is of hagiography, where the almost invariable beauty of female saints reflects their inner virtue. Romance is similarly peopled by

idealised ladies, who possess the physical attributes associated with beauty in this period – fair hair, grey eyes, white skin, red cheeks, harmony of features, form and proportion. As also in hagiography, beauty is related to class; romance heroines are almost always noble. Patient Griselda, whose story (retold by Chaucer in his *Clerk's Tale*) partly underpins the Cinderella story, is surprising because her beauty and virtue transcend her lower class status; an ugly romance heroine would be considerably more surprising. Beauty is so much a requirement for the heroine that, as Helen Cooper writes, 'The plain fact of beauty . . . is uninteresting: it is the many things that can be done with it that give it power'[11] – the original ways in which it may be conveyed, its complex narrative functions, and the responses it evokes in reader or audience.

The conventionality of beauty is demonstrated by the occurrence of similar, quite simple terms of description across Middle English romances: ladies (and sometimes men) are fair, white, bright; their countenances compared to blossom – lily and rose, milk or snow. Physical and moral comparators are often collocated – they are also gentle, free, godly. As the repeated use of adjectives connected with light and angelic similes suggest, they typically outshine all others in both physical and moral terms. The description of the lady Belisaunt in *Amis and Amiloun* is characteristic, recounted in the simple superlatives typical of fairy tale:

> That riche douke that y of told,
> He hadde a douhter fair and bold,
> Curteise, hende [noble] and fre.
> When sche was fiften winter old,
> In al that lond nas ther non yhold
> So semly on to se,
> For sche was gentil and avenaunt [graceful].
> Hir name was cleped Belisaunt.[12]

Her qualities combine status, physical beauty and moral virtue, and are captured in her name, probably derived from terms signifying beauty, amiability, graciousness and strength. The alliterative romance *William of Palerne* employs a similar technique: its lady Melior ('better'), daughter of the Emperor of Rome, is 'a dere damisele . . . / of alle fasoun [figure] þe fairest þat euer freke [man] sei3e'; she is also a 'menskful [honourable] mayde', 'a more curteyse creature' than any in the world.[13] Such descriptions occur across periods and genres of romance, in English from the late thirteenth century through to the early modern period.

Beauty is conventional – expected, depicted with predictable vocabulary and collocations – yet it rarely serves no purpose. Beauty both indicates and enhances character and frequently proves pivotal in romance plots through its affective force. Many follow familiar folk patterns. Thus the Emperor's wife in *Octavian* is a 'bryght os blossom on brere / And semely in hys syght': her beauty is first contrasted with her childlessness, but later reflects her innocence when she is falsely accused of adultery.[14] Beauty repeatedly signals noble and virtuous identity, asserting innocence and virtue and playing a prominent role in identifying lost or abandoned wives or children. Thus the beauty of the eponymous heroine Le Freine ('In al Inglond ther nas non / A fairer maiden') indicates her worth and moral perfection.[15] Sir Guroun falls in love with her when she greets him graciously and he sees 'her semblaunt [appearance] and her gentrise [breeding], / Her lovesum eighen, her rode [complexion] so bright' (268-69). The same beauty and moral virtue reveal her as the abandoned twin of the noble 'fair and bright' (320) Le Coudre, to whom Guroun is affianced, and hence as a fitting wife.

Beauty is both symbolic of virtue and pivotal in the penitential romance of *Sir Isumbras*. Isumbras' wife, never named, is 'fayre . . . / As any in erthe myghte be'

(31-32), but also 'meke and mylde' (340), her virtue evident in her response to the suffering with which God punishes her husband's pride – their lands are destroyed, their children taken, and she herself sold to a heathen king.[16] Her beauty is the motivating force in the king's response: seeing her bright countenance, white as whale's bone, fair as blossom, 'Hym thowghte an angell that she were, / Komen out of hevenne that day' (275-76). Later, as a widow and 'ryche qwene' she is 'bothe bryghte and shene' (541-42); 'that lady bryghte', 'the lady that was so fayre of face' (650, 703), her beauty again emblematic of her virtue, as she distributes charity – eventually to find that the palmer she rewards so liberally is her own husband, and to be reunited with their children. In the romance of *Floris and Blanchefleur*, which also treats the separation of lovers, the child-protagonists ('feirer children' than all in the land) are characterised by their flower-like beauty, also reflected in their names, a beauty that later acts as a catalyst for their reunion: the image of the beautiful young couple, each of whom insists on defending the other, inspires pity in the spectators, and eventually in the Emir, who has intended to make Blanchefleur his wife.[17]

The power of beauty is transformative: it functions like the light it is so often depicted as, its brightness asserting innocence and virtue and exposing and opposing evil. In these optimistic works, with their notable folk and fairy-tale qualities, beauty's power is victorious: the movement from disorder to order, winter to summer identified by Northrop Frye as characteristic of the romance genre is also evident in the triumph of beauty.[18]

'No earthly woman'

Beauty's most notable affect is to inspire love. Yet such affect can be violent and dangerous, inspiring pain, illness and jealousy. In *Ywain and Gawain*, the English adaptation of Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier au Lion*, Ywain looks on the

lady whose husband he has just killed, 'white so mylk, / In al that land was none swilk [equal]'; 'gent and small, / Hir yghen clere als es cristall', and immediately his heart is captured. [19] The romance traces his wooing, loss and madness; and the series of extreme chivalric challenges he must face to win back Alundyne. The love inspired by beauty that is in many ways the *raison d'être* of romance is inextricably linked with pain, sorrow, testing. In Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, beauty works in the mind's eye of the Man in Black as he lovingly recreates the image of his dead lady. Her fairness 'of beaute, / Of maner, and of comlynesse' (826-27) opens onto a celestial ideal: she outshines the summer sun, the moon and the stars, with her hair neither red, yellow, nor brown, but most like gold. The blazon of the lady immortalises her beauty but is also a crucial stage in the Man in Black's process of memory and articulation of his terrible loss.

The late romance *The Erle of Toulous* memorably portrays the extraordinary, double-edged power of beauty. The Emperor's wife, Dame Beulybon ('beautiful and good'), is depicted with typical similes: she is the fairest apart from Mary, compared to snow and to the rose, her brightness singled out. What is remarkable is her affect: the Earl, who hears of her beauty, is immediately struck by it, and bribes one of his prisoners to let him see the Empress. The description reflects his wondering gaze, surpassing the earlier conventional similes in its details of dress and jewels, features, hands and body; when she speaks, she seems 'an aungell of hevyn'.[20] Her affective power is conveyed in terms of light:

> Hym thoght sche was as bryght
> Os blossome on the tree.
> Of all the syghtys that ever he sye
> Raysyd never none hys herte so hye,
> Sche was so bryght of blee. (329-33)

The poet is skilled in depicting a mutual affect that is both enduring and honourable: though the Earl's supposed friend betrays his presence to the Empress, urging her to capture him, she insists on keeping the promise, turning twice so that he can see her beauty; though the Earl articulates his love and wishes she were his wife, he speaks not to her but to God. Their only exchange is the message of the ring that she sends after him – a virtuous token revealed to and endorsed by her confessor. Her innocence is set against the wrongful accusation of adultery by the two knights whose corrupt love she refuses, and who murder a young page to place in her bed. Ultimately she is defended by the Earl, who is rewarded with her hand after the Emperor's death. Beauty inspires true, chaste, loyal love – yet it also provokes life-threatening, unruly and violent desire. Its affect reaches beyond physical sight, and endures far beyond one silent meeting – a force that is intimately connected with the spiritual power of virtue and truth. Light against dark: this is the dynamic of such texts.

The paradoxical mix of pleasure and pain connected with beauty, its transformative but tragic power, is the focus of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. The description of Palamon and Arcite's first view of Emilye revivifies conventional metaphors. Emilye is the archetype of beauty, surpassing the Maytime garden where she walks: fairer than lily, fresher than May, her complexion vies with the roses, she rises with the sun and she sings as an angel; unusually, Chaucer individualises her by including the detail of her long braided yellow hair. The description combines erotic and spiritual in its use of the rose and lily, emblems of passion and purity. Like female saints, Emilye is placed as an ideal, her beauty opening the way to Paradise, and indeed Palamon is uncertain 'wher she be womman or goddesse' (1100), thinking she is Venus herself. Yet gazing on Emilye's beauty is also the catalyst for the fatal enmity of Palamon and Arcite, who fall in love with the kind of sudden illness

depicted in ‘Merciles Beaute’: love leads to a battle so savage that it seems to be between a mad lion and cruel tiger, or between wild boars, as the pair fight up to their ankles in blood. The tale ends with the cruel death of the victor of the later tournament, Arcite, through the arbitrary command of Saturn. This is not a story that rewards virtue with ideal beauty but rather a tragedy occasioned by beauty’s inexorability – a force quite separate from the lady herself, who is unaware of the rivalry of Palamon and Arcite for much of the story, and whose only words link her beauty clearly to the spiritual ideal as she prays to Diana to be allowed to remain a virgin. Chaucer creates a dark world of the passions in which characters are bereft of free will and beauty’s force is inextricably linked with suffering and death.

The romance of *Emaré* takes up the theme of the seemingly unearthly power of virtuous beauty to explore the dark side of the emotions it may trigger. The opening description of the eponymous heroine offers a characteristic example of the use of physical and moral superlatives: Emaré is ‘fayr and bryght’, ‘the fayrest creature borne’, ‘fayr and gent’, ‘fayr and fre’.[21] This narrator elaborates on his heroine’s courtly education: her beauty and courtesy inspire love and honour. Emaré’s beauty is both complemented and enhanced by the proto-magical cloth sent to her father by the King of Sicily – embroidered with the tales of celebrated lovers, its gold so brilliantly decorated with gems that the emperor cannot see ‘for glysteryng of the ryche ston’ (100). Just as the cloth seems ‘a fayry’ (104), so, when Emaré puts on the robe into which it is fashioned, she seems ‘non erthely wommon’ (245), dazzling the emperor’s eyes and inciting incestuous desire. The plot centres on Emaré’s repeated exiles, as she is sent out to sea in a rudderless boat first by her father, then by her jealous mother-in-law. The robe that contributes to her unearthly beauty, making her a ‘glysteryng thyng’ (350), both protects her, inspiring the love of

the king of Wales, and incites unruly desire and jealousy. The narrative repeatedly emphasises her seemingly supernatural effect: she 'semed non erdly thyng' (396), 'non erdyly wyght' (701). Ultimately, beauty also brings about the denouement – but it is beauty transformed: not the beauty of Emaré or the robe, but of her child, which effects the reunion with her lost husband. The romance ends with the image of 'the lady gent, / In the robe bryght and shene' (932-33) in her husband's arms; the robe, symbol of the seemingly magical power of beauty, is celebrated, reflecting Emaré's virtue, yet its affective power has also incited the darkest of desires, enacted in exile and suffering. The message of the tales embroidered on it is enacted in Emaré's own story, which asserts the truth and endurance of love – but beauty's glittering power is not unmixed: it also leads to suffering, both for Emaré and for the lovers of legend.

In Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, a fourteenth-century reworking of the twelfth-century *lai* of *Lanval* by Marie de France, unearthly beauty is embodied in the faery mistress. Here, the affect of beauty aligns with wish fulfilment as, within the transformative space of the forest, the exiled and humiliated knight Launfal is summoned by the maidens of Tryamour, the daughter of the King of Faery, who seeks him as her lover. The poet luxuriates in the description of her rich pavilion, the opulent feast she provides, and particularly her physical beauty as she lies uncovered to her waist in a splendid purple bed. While Guinevere is also a 'lady bright', her beauty is marred by her promiscuous behaviour, and no other detail is given; the blazon with its metaphors of lily and rose, and detail of golden hair, is left for the otherworldly lady.[22] Tryamour's incomparable beauty, her love and the largesse that accompanies it rewards Launfal for the virtues that the court has failed to recognise, in particular, his own generosity. Beauty is the catalyst for moral resolution, and though the love it inspires is secret and erotic, it is also defined by the chivalric

virtues of truth, steadfastness and loyalty. Beauty is not unthreatening in this narrative: when Launfal breaks the taboo and reveals her existence, Tryamour deprives Launfal of all his gifts at a stroke; ultimately, however, she returns to prove the truth of Launfal's supposedly traitorous statement that he has loved 'a fairir woman' (694) than Guinevere has ever seen. Beauty provides the denouement in the wonderful description of the arrival of ten maidens 'bright of ble . . . so bright and shene' (849-50), of another ten still fairer, proving Launfal's statement that the least is more beautiful than the queen, and then of Tryamour herself, 'bright as blosme on brere' (934), the extended description of whom surpasses even the first. She is characterised by light, shining from her eyes, her rosy complexion, her golden hair, the gold and gems of her crown and attire, and her white palfrey. Her magical powers, however, are also manifest in her blinding of Guinevere in punishment, chillingly enacting Guinevere's earlier statement 'Yif he bringeth a fairere thinge, / Put out my eyn gray!' (809-10). Tryamour passes judgement on the chivalric society and finds it wanting. Her supernatural powers go far beyond those afforded Emaré, taking the affect of love into the realm of magic, but they also, once again, function to establish chivalric order and to inspire virtue.

All these works collocate beauty and virtue. Virtuous beauty, however, may have deeply unsettling effects and may act as a catalyst for extreme actions. Its light is both inspirational and potentially destructive. Romance dynamics are repeatedly shaped by the tension between ideal beauty and its devastating effects.

Beauty and betrayal

What of beauty that may fulfil a physical ideal but fails to collocate with virtue? This is a subject that is explored less in romance than we might expect – perhaps because of its challenges. Female protagonists with negative roles often fulfil

other conventions: they tend to be evil queens or wicked mothers-in-law or stepmothers, motivated by jealousy. The reader or audience may well assume them to be beautiful, but this is not elaborated. False beauty in romance has two faces: the faithless lover and the seductress, often associated with the enchantress.

In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, tragedy results from the conflict between idealised beauty and flawed reality. The context of the Trojan War cannot but recall the archetypal narrative of the destructive power of beauty, that of Helen of Troy, who figures in the poem as 'the faire queene Eleyne' (II.1556) and whose 'ravysshyng' (I.62) by Paris forms a counterpoint to the love of Troilus and Criseyde. The poem both celebrates and condemns the power of beauty in its account of the 'double sorwe' (I.1) of Troilus, first his love for Criseyde and then her betrayal of him. Chaucer employs all the conventional imagery of falling in love, rendering Criseyde's beauty and its effects on Troilus with sophistication, originality and realism. She is both a pattern, 'Right as oure firste lettre is now an A, / In beaute first so stood she, makeles', depicted as a bright star in a black cloud, and vividly individualised, 'Simple of atir and debonaire of chere, / With ful assured lokyng and manere' (I.171-72; 181-82). She is the ideal of womanhood, her outer perfection suggesting her inner beauty: 'men myght in hire gesse / Honour, estat, and wommanly noblesse'. (I.286-87). The effect of 'the subtile stremes of hire yen' (I.305) on Troilus is to inspire the terrible pains of love-sickness, but also to open onto the divine: his Boethian song, 'Benigne Love, thow holy bond of thynges' (III.1261-74) envisages the fair chain of love that binds together the universe. That it is placed directly before the consummation with its wondering description of Criseyde's body, 'Hire armes smale, hire streghte bak and softe, / Hire sydes long, flesshly, smothe, and white' (III.1247-48), directly connects physical beauty with the sublime. In her eyes, Paradise stands

'formed' (V.817), and the conclusion of Book III is indeed visionary, celebrating the power of love to hold the elements 'discordable' (1753) in harmony, ruling sun, moon and tides, maintaining peoples and individuals in virtuous accord, and inspiring moral excellence in Troilus himself.

Beauty opens onto the understanding and intense experience of divine love, moving the individual further towards perfection. Yet this evocation of the sublime quality of love is countered in the last two books by its inverse, the narrative of Criseyde's fickleness and betrayal of Troilus. Sent to the Greek camp in exchange for a Trojan prisoner, she fails to keep her promise to return. It is the destruction of Troilus' beauty through the grief of betrayal that is the emphasis of Book V: he is so weakened and changed that he is unrecognisable, walking with a crutch. Criseyde's modest demeanour of being 'under shames drede' (I.180) is transformed into a more negative characteristic: she is 'slydynge of corage' (V.825). Yet the affective power of Chaucer's realisation of Criseyde's fear and regret creates a haunting sense of pathos; in her only too frail, human beauty, she becomes a tragic figure, lamenting her exile from Troy and her betrayal, and foreseeing that her reputation for faithlessness will echo down the centuries. It is hard for the audience fully to endorse the narrator's conclusion, that this is a tale of 'payens corsed olde rites', illustrating this 'false worldes brotelnesse' (V.1849, 1832), for the love occasioned by Criseyde's beauty has also opened onto the sublime. Tellingly, Chaucer places near the end of the work the line 'Paradise stood formed in yën', recalling the visionary power of beauty even as we see its devastation and the failure of the ideals it has brought into being.

Female beauty then, is capable of the most violent consequences, both making and destroying individual identities, friendships, even civilisations, its affective power

transformative in extreme ways. Beauty remains shadowed by the recollection of the Fall. On the whole, however, extended treatments of beauty in romance are linked to the power of virtue, and centred on the heroines of romance, the princesses and their like who form fitting lovers and wives for the knight protagonists. Beautiful, dangerous, potentially malevolent women tend to be in some sense other, associated with the supernatural: human practitioners of magic or creatures of faery. It is through the ambiguous figure of the enchantress that romance most acutely engages with the duality of female beauty.

Sir Launfal presents a positive version of the enchantress in its depiction of Tryamour – the faery mistress who fulfils all material desires. Her act of blinding Guinevere hints at more sinister, violent powers, but her role is to uphold the virtues and values of chivalry. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, by contrast, engages with the danger and duality inherent in female beauty by depicting two women, the beautiful seductress Lady Bertilak and her inverse, the hideous, aged lady who proves to be Morgan le Fay. The castle of Hautdesert, seemingly a refuge for Gawain in his quest for the Green Knight but in actuality the site of his testing, is characterised by material beauty – rich feasting, clothing and furnishings – and most of all, the surpassing beauty of the Lady, the wife of Gawain's host: 'Ho watz þe fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre / And of compas and colour and costes, of alle oþer, / And wener þen Wenore, as the wy3e þo3t'.[23] Perhaps the comparison to Guinevere, who should be at the top of the hierarchy of earthly beauty, along with the lack of collocation with virtue, should alert the hero and the wary reader or listener to danger. Sinister too is the Lady's companion in the chapel where Gawain first sees her. The poet draws attention to the contrast: 'unlyke on to loke the ladyes were' (950); one so fresh, the other withered, with rough, hanging wrinkled cheeks and a swarthy chin,

black brows and bleared lips, swathed in veils and kerchiefs: 'Hir body watz schort and þik, / Hir buttokez bal3 [rounded] and brode; / More lykkerwys [pleasing] on to lyk / Watz that scho had on lode' [with her]' (966-69). The younger Lady lives up to the stereotype of the seductress as she secretly enters Gawain's bedchamber while her husband is out hunting. From both Christian and chivalric perspectives, as the wife of Gawain's host her beauty is certainly forbidden, while her offer of her body is startlingly direct, '3e ar welcum to my cors / Yowre awen won [pleasure] to wale [take]' (1237-38). The comedy of Gawain's predicament, imprisoned in his bed by the Lady, is delicately realised, but the poem also makes real his temptation by emphasising Gawain's genuine delight in the Lady's beauty:

> He se3 hir so glorious and gayly atyred,
> So fautles of hir fetures and of so fyne hewes,
> Wiȝt wallande [strong surging] joye warmed his hert. (1760-62)

The conventional attributes of white skin, red cheeks, laughing lips and sweetness are all present in the poet's realisation of the Lady, but written into her seductive power rather than linked to virtue. Dalliance is characterised by 'smylyng', 'merþe' and 'blis' (1763-64), but also by danger: 'Gret perile bitwene hem stod, / Nif Maré of hir kny3t con mynne [be mindful]' (1768-69). As the Lady's repeated metaphors of imprisonment, capture and binding and the violence of the interwoven hunting scenes suggests, Gawain is in danger not just of betraying his host, but of losing his life and forfeiting salvation. The pleasures of beauty conceal a much more sinister plot: the veiled lady is revealed to be Morgan le Fay, the archetypal romance enchantress.

Beauty becomes the face of temptation and at the end of the work, Gawain places himself in the tradition of men betrayed by beautiful women: Eve, Delilah, Bathsheba. Yet the Lady's beauty is more complex than this: Gawain does not succumb to sexual temptation and in accepting the gift of the green girdle which she

promises will protect his life, she leads him into a sin the recognition of which adds to his chivalric virtues the one that is missing, humility. Beauty, then, does enable virtue – though its seductions are perilous. The audience is never entirely sure whether Hautdesert and its inhabitants are to be seen as positive or negative, divine, demonic, or simply other. Beauty is fascinating, menacing but also instructive.

Malory's *Morte Darthur*

Malory's *Morte Darthur*, written about a century later, draws on all these faces of beauty. While the collocation of beauty and virtue continues to be crucial, Malory repeatedly offers alternative perspectives, probing the manipulative power of the enchantress and the potentially demonic aspect of beauty, but also the potentially tragic consequences of beauty where individual virtue may not align with social mores or does not elicit love. It is a given that the female protagonists of the book are beautiful, just as they are of high status, great ladies and queens. Guinevere is 'the moste valyaunte and fayryst', 'of her beauté and fayrenesse . . . one of the fayrest alive'; La Beale Isode is 'fayrest lady and maydyn of the worlde', the 'noble surgeon' whose surpassing beauty is captured in her name; Elaine, daughter of King Pellam, is 'a fayre lady and a good'.[24] Yet beauty is always complicated, for the love it inspires cannot be resisted. Malory offers positive models of such love: the encounter between the knight Alisaunder and Alys la Beale Pilgryme, 'a passynge fayre woman', for example, is realised with great poignancy, when Alys asks to see the victorious Alisaunder's face and immediately loves him, 'A swete Fadir Jesu! The I muste love, and never othir'; in response he asks to see her face: 'And anone she unwympeled her, and whan he sawe her vysage he seyde, "A, Lorde Jesu! Here have I founde my love and my lady!"' (10.38-39, 511-12). It is not the precise details of beauty but its mutual affect that is so immediately realised. In the tale of Sir Gareth

of Orkney, Malory engages humorously with this power in his depiction of Gareth's all-consuming desire for the lady he supposes a stranger but proves to be his beloved Dame Lyonesse: 'Jesu wold that the lady of this Castell Perelus were so fayre as she is!' (7.21, 259). In this tale, beauty collocates in different ways with virtue: in the Fair Unknown, Sir Gareth's refusal of Sir Persant's beautiful virgin daughter, sent to his bed to test his chastity; in Lyonesse's own courtesy and resistance to enforced marriage, and her striking agency, including her articulation of her love and insistence on testing Gareth; and in her sister Lyonet's insistence that the couple wait until they are married to consummate their love. It is the actions that accompany and are inspired by beauty that are crucial, upholding the social order though the defence of right and through virtuous marriage.

Yet such actions are more frequently problematic right from the start of the work, central to which is the irresistible quality of love and its destructive yet inevitable expression in adultery. Uther's obsession with the 'fair lady' Igrayne (1.1, 1) leads to war, as well as to the shape-shifting through which Arthur is begotten; Arthur's insistence on marrying Guinevere despite Merlin's warnings eventually causes the fall of the realm through her adultery with Launcelot; Merlin, obsessed by the fair Nenyve, reveals his magic to her and is imprisoned in a cave for ever; Tristram's adulterous love for Isode leads to his death at the hands of King Mark.

Perhaps the most compelling of Malory's beautiful ladies is Elaine of Astolat, Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, who falls inexorably in love with Sir Launcelot, eventually to die of unrequited love. In her, beauty and virtue clearly intersect, and Malory elaborates more than is usual: Bors describes her as 'a passyng fayre damesell, and well besayne and well taught'; later Launcelot echoes the collocation: she is 'a full fayre maydyn, goode and jentill, and well itaught' (18.16, 821; 18.19,

826). Yet alongside her gentleness, she demonstrates remarkable agency: manifesting extreme love for Launcelot not just in her swoons and shrieks when she sees him wounded but in her healing care for him and later, her moving and open declaration of love. Her beauty and virtue are crucial, for as Sir Bors states, they make her what, in another story, would have been the ideal wife for Launcelot, who so immediately inspires love in her, but can only offer her a rich dowry. She is the fairest corpse, as she floats down the Thames on her barge covered with black samite, and 'she lay as she had smyled' (18.20, 829). Her tragic beauty and death provide a haunting counterpoint to the love of Launcelot and Guinevere – in itself, loyal and true, but deeply destructive in the social rift it causes.

Female beauty, then, marks virtue and inspires grand passion and great feats, but is always dangerous, shadowed by strife, suffering, betrayal, death. Nor is beauty always collocated with virtue in the *Morte*. Enchantresses are numerous, and their arts can be both benign and malevolent. Malory does not explore their beauty at any length, yet it is often essential to the plot, a given element of their powers. Morgan le Fay, Arthur's half sister and rival, is the main practitioner of magic, '"the falsist sorseres and wycche moste that is now lyvyng"' (8.34, 344).[25] Modern images of the witch tend to be closer to that of Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but here she figures as a beautiful and predatory queen. She aims both to destroy Arthur and to be first in beauty, as evinced in her imprisonment of a lady 'naked as a nedyll' in boiling water 'many wyntyrs and dayes' because she is 'the fayryst lady of that contrey' (11.1, 620-21). She pursues a series of lovers, including Launcelot, whom she attempts to ensnare or destroy, most memorably when she and three other queens abduct him to demand his love. Their actions are echoed by those of the enchantress Hellawes, who attempts to ensnare Launcelot through her beauty. If he

had not refused the seemingly innocent request of this mysterious 'fayre damsel' for 'one kiss,' his body, she reveals, would have fallen into her power:

> 'Than wolde I have bawmed hit and sered hit, and so to have kepte hit my lyve dayes; and dayly I sholde have clypped the and kyssed the, dispyte of Quene Gwenyvere.' (6.15, 215-16)

Here beauty and seduction combine in the most menacing way, as desire to possess the body surpasses desire to preserve life. Eventually, it will be Hellawes who dies of unrequited love for Launcelot: the enchantress takes on another face, the damsel in distress, and beauty becomes vulnerable rather than predatory.

In Malory's tale of the Sankgreall, desire for the body becomes desire for the soul, and beauty the weapon of the devil. On this quest, virginity and asceticism are conditions for success and the snare of beauty opens the way to failure. Thus Perceval finds himself on a barren rocky mountain, to be tempted by 'a jantillwoman of grete beauté' (14.8, 709). His desire for 'the fayryst creature that ever he saw' is increased by her provision of a marvellous feast and 'the strengyst wyne that ever he dranke', and her seductive play (14.9, 711). At the last moment, as he lies down naked next to her, Perceval makes the sign of the Cross, only to see the lady disappear into the winds and burning sea: she 'was the mayster fyende of helle, which hath pousté over all other devyllis' (14.10, 712). Bors is similarly tempted by 'the fayryst lady that ever he saw', more richly attired than Guinevere, who protests her love for him, and seems along with her women to throw herself from her castle parapet in despair, but disappears with 'a grete noyse and a grete cry as all the fyndys of helle had bene aboute hym' (16.11-12, 739-40). The enchantress here is revealed as the demonic temptress, her beauty illusory yet capable of sending knights to eternal damnation. Such beauty is countered by that of true virtue, embodied in the Grail Quest by Perceval's saintly sister, who gives her blood and life to save that of a lady

suffering from leprosy. As ever, Malory offers telling details – here, the sister's recollection of how 'as woman of the worlde' she loved her hair, now shorn to make a girdle for the holy sword of King David (17.7, 760). The distinction between spiritual and secular beauty is clearly conveyed through the contrast between the ascetic nun-like figure and the seductive lady offering material delights and sexual pleasures. More ambiguous is the nature of the 'yonge, lusty and fayre' lady who also offers Bors a joyful feast, and whose quest he nobly takes up to restore her to her estate (16.7, 732). Here the lady's virtue is implied by her respect of Bors' spiritual devotion, when he chooses to maintain his penitential fast and rejects material comforts. Beauty is proven virtuous both through the virtue it inspires, and its recognition of that virtue. The narrative tests interpretative skills: of the beautiful, of those they encounter, and of its readers.

Beauty is double edged. It is a fundamental building block of romance, and virtues shines out through it – inspiring love and heroism, but also attracting danger. In its ideal form, it marks interior, spiritual beauty. Yet even in this form, it is potentially destructive – attracting unwanted desire; occasioning negative emotions and sometimes evil acts. Ideal beauty is hateful to those who do not comprehend and therefore envy it: it renders them hateful. In romance, we expect light to triumph over darkness, and in many instances this is the case – but not always, and not in the most celebrated, as at the end of the Arthurian story.

It is unsurprising that romance writers return to the ambiguity of beauty – to the disordered emotions it evokes, emotions that run counter to social structures; to the figures who betray the ideal, and to those whose beauty masks ambition and potentially malign powers. The enchantress may respond to desires and dreams of ideal love, but may also be, or become, the witch or demon, wish-fulfilment quickly

changing to nightmare. Around the beautiful woman weave fears as well as fantasies of sexuality, transformation, death and desire. The fascination of the other, the unknown, is dangerous, but there is always the possibility that beauty will open onto Paradise and offer salvation.

---

[1] Geoffrey Chaucer, 'Merciles Beaute', *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (1987; Oxford, 1988), p. 659, lines 1-3. References are to this edition, cited by line number.

[2] Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Robin Waterfield, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford, 2002), 250c-e, 252b, pp. 34, 36. Stephan Gersh and Maarten J. F. M. Hoenen, *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages: A Doxographic Approach* (Berlin, 2002), for a discussion of how Platonic concepts and material, including from the *Phaedrus*, were transmitted to later medieval writers via intermediary sources (including Calcidius' translation of Plato's *Timaeus*, and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and the works of Patristic writers such as Augustine of Hippo).

[3] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London, 1998); Bk Mu 2-3, pp. 395, 400. The nature of the Deity or prime mover is discussed in Bk Lambda 7.

[4] Aristotle's *Poetics*, trans. James Hutton (New York, 1982), Bk 7, p. 53.

[5] Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Watts (London, 1999), Bk III.viii, p. 61.

[6] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 1991), X.xxxiv (53), p. 210.

[7] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia ad Guillelmum* 12, *Patrologia Latina* 182, cols 914-16, trans. in Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven, 1986, originally pub. 1959), p. 7.

[8] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones in Cantica* LXXV.11, *Patrologia Latina* 183, col. 1193, trans. in Eco, *Art and Beauty*, p. 10.

[9] Hugh of St Victor, *Soliloquium de Arrha Animae*, *Patrologia Latina* 176, col. 951, trans. in Eco, *Art and Beauty*, p. 10.

[10] *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures*, ed. and trans. Erwin Panofsky, 2nd edn (Princeton, 1979), pp. 63-65, cited in Eco, *Art and Beauty*, p. 14. On medieval aesthetic experience, see especially Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013). Carruthers explores the 'making sense' of physical sensations (13) and hence, the sensory basis of aesthetic judgements and vocabulary (taste, sweetness, variety).

[11] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2004), p. 15.

[12] *Amis and Amiloun*, in *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance*, ed. Jennifer Fellows, Everyman's Library (London, 1993), pp. 73-145, ll. 421-28. This work and the verse romances discussed below are contained in manuscripts dating to the later fourteenth century and have earlier Continental or Anglo-Norman sources and analogues, with the exception of *The Earl of Toulouse* (c.1400), found in a manuscript of c.1500 and with no known source.

[13] *William of Palerne: An Alliterative Romance*, ed. G. H. V. Bunt (Groningen, 1985), ll. 401-2, 405-6.

[14] *Octavian*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Everyman's Library (London, 1973; 1992), pp. 75-124, ll. 41-42. References are to this edition, cited by line number.

[15] *Lay le Freine*, in *Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Donald B. Sands, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter, 1986), pp. 233-45, ll. 239-40. References are to this edition, cited by line number.

[16] *Sir Isumbras*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Mills, pp. 125-47, ll. 31-32, 340. References to this edition, cited by line number.

[17] *Florys and Blancheflour*, in *Of Love and Chivalry*, ed. Fellows, pp. 43-72, l. 2.

[18] See Frye's exploration of romance's 'cyclical movement of descent into a night world and a return to the idyllic world' (54) in *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA, 1976).

[19] *Ywain and Gawain*, in *Ywain and Gawain, Sir Percyvell of Gales, The Anturs of Arther*, ed. Maldwyn Mills. Everyman's Library (London, 1992), pp. 1-102, ll. 819-20, 899-900.

[20] *The Erle of Toulous*, in *Of Love and Chivalry*, ed. Fellows, pp. 231-65, l. 350. References are to this edition, cited by line number.

[21] *Emaré*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Mills, pp. 46-74, ll. 45, 50, 55, 71. References are to this edition, cited by line number.

[22] *Sir Launfal*, in *Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Sands, ed., pp. 203-32, ll. 41, 292-300. References are to this edition, cited by line number.

[23] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: 'Pearl', 'Cleanness', 'Patience', 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, 5th edn, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter, 2007), ll. 943-45. References are to this edition, cited by line number.

[24] Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. P. J. C. Field, Arthurian Studies LXXX, 2 vols (Cambridge, 2013), vol. 1, Book 3.1, p. 76; Book 8.8-9, p. 302; Book 4.1, 99. References are to this edition, cited by Caxton's book and section numbers, and page number.

[25] See also my discussion in 'Violent Magic in Middle English Romance', *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature: A Casebook*, ed. Albrecht Classen, Routledge Medieval Casebooks (New York, 2004), pp. 225-40: pp. 232-36.